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ABOLISH FRATERNITIES

Opinion | November 7, 2016

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CW: extreme sexual, physical, and gendered violence, explicit sexual content

A previous version of this article named Tufts University Fraternities where incidents of bias and assault took place. In order to protect the identities of our sources—whom we don't want to identify to protect their safety on a small and insular campus—we have decided to take the names of these fraternities out of the article.

Tufts tour guides will tell you that *fraternities at Tufts are different*, they are full of *nice guys*, and are *nothing like frats at state schools*.

Yet, I know a woman who was sexually assaulted at a fraternity formal and a trans person who was called a faggot by brothers as they walked down Pro Row. I know people who have been turned away from parties because they weren't blonde, White women, and someone whose rapist was protected by his fraternity for over a year, until it was discovered that he had over five pending assault cases against him. I know people who have had to bear witness to parties that openly mocked their marginalized identities.

Fraternities have, and will continue to be, hotbeds for campus violence: *racialized violence* (Tufts fraternities historically denied Black students entry), sexual violence (fraternities protect rapists under the guise of brotherhood), gendered violence (foundational to fraternities is *misogyny*), and *physical violence* (the hazing that I and countless others experienced can be categorized as assault).

Fraternities claim to be founded on values like “brotherhood” and “loyalty” and “trust,” but in reality are institutions rooted in White supremacy, queerphobia, heterosexism, and transphobia.

For these reasons, Tufts needs to follow the path of the other NESCAC schools and abolish fraternities—once and for all.

(I should note that in this piece, both because of my own direct experiences and because it's impossible to cover everything wrong with fraternities in one article, I will focus on how fraternities at Tufts objectify women, reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and cisheteropatriarchy, and enact physical abuse on people during pledging.)

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My first year of Tufts I rushed a fraternity. The majority of my friends were White cis women, most of whom had just joined sororities. I hadn't found community yet, and while I had friends—even mentors—I felt like I needed something else. I was seeking validation in all the wrong places. So instead of investing in my already-established relationships, in my clubs and interests, I decided to join a fraternity. I wanted to be included in an organization and a system that I had previously thought would never accept me. I wanted approval from the men who had rejected me all my life. And, they wanted me too! My queerness became a token status for the straight brothers, a way for them to seem progressive and accepting.

I joined what was supposed to be one of the “good” fraternities, one with nice guys and low-key parties—only now do I realize there is no such thing as a good

fraternity.

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The first night of pledging I was blindfolded and brought into a basement of an off-campus house where I took a shot of what I think was Fireball and then was welcomed to the brotherhood. That night was supposed to be a “fun night;” it wasn’t when the “real pledging” began. I had to serve brothers beer and get to know their names. Then, they brought two women—neither of whom were Tufts students—into the basement, who proceeded to disrobe and have sex with each other on a mattress on the basement floor while we were all told to watch. When I asked to leave, I was told I could step towards the back but couldn’t exit the basement. I was pressured to stay, and too afraid to defend myself. Forcing someone to watch sex acts can be categorized as assault under Tufts policies.

I stood there watching 18-year-old boys perform oral sex on these women. I watched as they were told to see who could bring one of the women to orgasm first. I watched on the outside, often turning my eyes away, horrified and disgusted, standing next to seniors in the fraternity enraptured by the scene, standing next to Tufts alumni who had returned to this off-campus basement to watch this “tradition.” I stood there knowing this would be the last night of my membership in the fraternity. If this was the night when nothing “bad” was happening to us, I couldn’t even begin to fathom what the rest of the process looked like. (It is important to note that a member of this fraternity has told me that this tradition no longer takes place.)

When it was all over and the women left, the brothers brought us into a room upstairs. They sat us in a circle and told us to memorize—in a moment that felt unbelievable—everyone’s names and allergies. We weren’t allowed to leave the room until we completed this task. They brought in a garbage can and told us if we had to pee or puke, do it in the garbage can. We were told to name the garbage

can and the other pledges decided to name it “Mia Khalifa.” Mia Khalifa is a porn star; these boys named a bucket of urine and puke after a woman.

I dropped the fraternity the next morning and was warned that I could not tell anyone what I had witnessed the previous night. And the truth is, I didn't tell anyone. I didn't tell anyone because within just 12 hours of being inside I had already internalized the mentality they were trying to create. I was scared of the brothers, scared of the house, scared of everything it represented. Within 12 hours, I was already silenced—my values and morals and beliefs already placed behind the fear I held for these boys. After all, this was a good fraternity. I didn't want to ruin their image.

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When I stepped into the basement of that off-campus house that night in January of 2015, I sought normalcy and normativity. But it took me a while to realize that even though I thought normal meant good and right, it actually means violent, and oppressive, and queerphobic, and there shouldn't be anything normal about being fed shots or forced to do homoerotic and homophobic tasks or made to eat other pledges' vomit. There should be nothing normal about sexual assault. But, here at Tufts, this is the norm. This happens every winter when boys rush fraternities.

So, I have to come to the conclusion that fraternities must be abolished. That I will not and cannot stand to have this culture pervade my campus, a culture that propagates violence, that enforces rape culture, that administers binaried ideas of gender, that tokenizes and fetishizes queerness, simultaneously using it as a way to seem progressive and as a tool of hazing. I cannot walk down Pro Row without thinking about what has happened on that street, who has been harmed, who has been violated, who has been abused, and how my university has continued to let this happen for over a century because the majority of the men who join fraternities are White, because they are often wealthy and cisgender

and straight, because they are ones who donate after graduation and fund the new buildings that seem to be popping up everywhere these days and comprise the Board of Trustees.

Tufts should abolish fraternities and invest in true community building, communities not founded in violence but rather in love and shared values. First years who come into their second semester feeling without community should be able to find it without turning to hazing and institutions rooted in oppression.

Zeta could become Rainbow House, which has been trying to get an independent house (instead of an apartment) for over 20 years. DU could become a collective. 123 could become a first-generation student center, ZBT could be a Mixed Race student center, and Pi Rho could be an Indigenous student center. The Group of Six could become the Group of Nine.

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My narrative alone warrants the abolition of fraternities, and so many other things happen that are just as terrible or even worse. This should scare us. If what I went through happened in a “good frat,” one that first years aren’t warned about, what is happening in other frats? What is happening on Pro Row when we go to sleep and frats haze? What have the frat brothers we all know done to each other, and done to themselves?

I’m sure everyone reading this has a story or a rumor they have heard about a Tufts fraternity, one they don’t want to believe. I think it’s time we start believing the rumors, we start acknowledging the fact that fraternities’ presence on this campus cannot be justified, and that every time we step into a fraternity, or defend a friend’s presence in a fraternity because they are “nice,” we are only serving a system that has proven itself indefensible. We are beyond a point where these institutions can be reformed. Next time you find yourself in the

basement of a fraternity on a Saturday night, I ask you think to about what happens there when you aren't invited.

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